

HES Conference Planning Committee Report

June 2024

Beatrice Cherrier
Matari Pierre Manigat
Maria Cristina Marcuzzo
Steven Medema (Chair)

I. Introduction and Background

The History of Economics Society (HES) Conference Planning Committee has been tasked with preparing a report for the HES Executive Committee that will help to guide the organization of future HES conferences. We are guided by two related objectives. First, and foremost, the HES strives to offer conferences that are integral to the life of the world-wide community of scholars interested in the history of economics. Second, attendance at the annual HES conference has seen a sharp drop since 2019, and the Society is concerned to see that drop-off reversed. The Conference Planning Committee (CPC) considers these objectives tightly linked, as both are related to issues including conference format, programming and accessibility—the latter involving factors such as location, cost, and timing.

It was the CPC’s unanimous position that the development of recommendations to effectively address these objectives and issues requires significant input from the history of economics community. With that in mind, the CPC prepared and circulated a survey to this larger community in November 2023. The survey was sent to current and former HES members, to the SHOE list, and to members of other scholarly societies in our field—the latter with the kind permission and assistance of the leadership of those societies.¹ A copy of the survey questions is appended to this report. We also gathered data on the last decade-plus of HES conferences from the HES itself and previous conference organizers. These data, and our considered evaluation of them, form the basis for this report and its recommendations.

II. Survey Results

This section offers a brief summary of the results of the survey conducted by the committee. The full set of survey results is included as an appendix to this report.

A. Information on Respondents:

The response to the CPC’s survey was strong (n = 259 respondents) and informative. A selection of respondent-related data is offered here.

¹ The other societies who circulated the survey to their members are ESHET, GIDE, STOREP, AISPE, and ALAHPE.

Current HES Members:	132
Former HES Members:	75
North American Respondents:	70
European Respondents:	136
Latin American Respondents:	29

It is noteworthy that 72 percent of the respondents were male and 59 percent hold tenured academic positions.

Of the 259 respondents, 114 (44.5 percent) had *not* attended an HES meeting in person in the past ten years.

A large number of respondents both belong to other academic societies and attend one or more ‘other’ history of economics conferences per year, typically some combination of ESHET and national/regional conferences.

B. Barriers to Attendance

The survey asked respondents to select up to three factors that work as barriers to their participation in the HES conference. ‘Travel cost’ was far and away the most cited barrier, garnering votes from 177 respondents (69 percent). ‘Other costs’ was the second most mentioned barrier and was cited by 65 respondents (25 percent). Costs, then, are clearly an issue.

Other factors cited by 10+ percent of respondents include personal and professional schedule conflicts, location issues (visas, etc.), lack of connection with the HES community, and carbon emissions.

C. Conference Format

It is noteworthy that 44.5 percent of the respondents, though only 28 percent of current HES member respondents, indicated that having a remote participation option would make their participation more likely. That said, this finding seems to conflict with actual remote attendance data from the Minneapolis and Vancouver conferences.

In what may be another cautionary data point regarding costs, 30.5 percent of people who attend in person (23.5 percent for current HES members) would be likely to move to virtual attendance if that option were available.

There were numerous comments offered on other aspects of the conference format, but it is not clear that any particular message or lesson emerges from these responses.

D. Conference Location and Timing

There is significant support for holding the HES conference in Europe on a regular basis. Indeed, Europe (164 votes) is the locations most likely to induce attendance, followed by the US/Canada (121) and Latin America (46). Current HES members express significantly greater enthusiasm for regular US/Canada conferences, and slightly weaker support for European venues, but their support for other locations largely tracks the overall set of responses.

There is a goodly amount of sentiment (68 percent of total respondents and 59 percent of HES members) in favor of a return to our former practice of holding conferences on college/university

campuses—not every year, as in the past, but on a rotating basis. It is our sense that a goodly amount of this sentiment, too, has to do with costs (particularly the low-cost campus-housing option).

June and July are far and away the months most favored for the conference.

Moving the HES conference to a bi-annual schedule has modest support. 58 percent of the respondents (61 percent of HES member respondents) indicated that their attendance would not be affected by this, while 34 percent (28 percent for HES members) indicated that they would be *more* likely to attend if the conference were held bi-annually. Of course, there is nothing to prevent an individual from attending the annual conference only once every two years, so we do not see attendance as a rationale for moving to a bi-annual schedule.

The numbers were very similar for a question asking whether respondents would be more likely to attend the HES conference if there were another conference immediately before or after it.

All of these location and timing results likely speak to the importance of travel costs, highlighted elsewhere in this report, for the decision to attend the conference.

III. Recommendations

Based on our evaluation and discussion of the information that we have gathered, we offer three basic sets of recommendations.

1. That the HES place a very high priority on minimizing the cost of attending the HES conference. This recommendation, in turn leads to several sub-recommendations.

1A. That the HES consider devoting some of its funds to support of the conference itself. In the (distant) past, the conference was actually a revenue *source* for the Society. The revenue provided by *JHET* makes conference revenue unnecessary. These *JHET* revenues are currently used, among other things, to finance ‘new initiatives.’ We believe that the annual conference is the Society’s most important activity and we are of the mind the Society should at least pilot for two or three years a program of conference funding that helps to significantly defray registration costs.

1B. That the HES return to regular, though by no means annual, hosting of conferences at the home institution of the HES president or, as relevant, the home institution of other HES members. This is likely both to hold down facilities ‘rental’ costs and offer the possibility of an inexpensive on-campus housing option for those who wish to avail themselves of that.

1C. That the HES look to hold conferences outside of the US, and particularly in Europe, once every four or five years. The HES has, from its inception, considered itself an *international* society. Today, a vast majority of the HES’s membership is located outside of North America, with the largest single concentration of members being in Europe. Given the outsized role that travel costs play in the cost of attendance, holding conferences nearer to large numbers of members will make it easier for more members to attend.

1D. That conferences held in North America be in locations easily accessible from Europe—i.e., along the Eastern Seaboard, convenient to airports with direct flights from Europe—on a

regular basis.

It bears emphasizing that there is no easy solution when it comes to venues. It is our understanding that the recent move to hold the HES meetings in ‘big cities’ was driven in part by a sense that this would lower transportation costs. However, the much higher lodging costs that can come with big-city venues may well be offsetting—and even more than offsetting—those flight-cost gains. We are aware that different options affect people differently, lowering costs for some and increasing costs for others. The overriding sentiment behind this first set of recommendations is to be deliberate about the cost side of conference planning, both annually and on a year-to-year basis—in the latter case, attempting to ensure that we are not repeatedly making costs prohibitive for the same set of people. As our survey data make clear, adjustments on the cost side are *the* key to increasing attendance at the annual conference.

2. That the HES continue with its traditional conference format, give serious thought to the issue of online participation, and eschew replacement of HES conferences with smaller, restricted-participation events. The field has seen an explosion of smaller, thematic events over the last decade. These are very valuable endeavors, particularly as vehicles for stimulating significant development of the authors’ papers. ‘Society’ conferences are a different animal. They allow authors to present and receive feedback on their work, which is important. But their most important function is the creation and development of relationships and networks. This is particularly true for early-career scholars and others new to the field. ‘Society’ conferences are also essential ingredients in the maintenance of a professional community. Though there is high variance in the quality of papers, we see this as a small price to pay for the benefits provided by these ‘open’ conferences. The Society may wish to explore the question of slightly stronger ‘gate-keeping’ at the conference submission stage, but we are agnostic on this question. If anything, we tilt toward greater openness, on the grounds that exposure to some of the many excellent HES sessions by stimulate ‘better’ work by those who may be excluded through more rigid gate-keeping. Differently put, the conference is not *JHET*.

The committee is divided on the issue of virtual participation. There can be no question that ‘virtual’ sessions allow for participation by those otherwise unable to attend, whether for financial or other reasons. We consider it imperative to improve access to the conference. However, the evidence suggests that virtual sessions are poorly attended relative to in-person ones, and the data from our survey suggests that physical attendance may be significantly impacted by the greater availability of a virtual option. Given our perspective on the importance of in-person interaction, recommend (i) that the Society devote its resources to supporting more extensive in-person participation and (ii) make a concerted effort to gather hard data on online session participation, both by those ‘dialing in’ and those ‘in the room’ for such sessions at the conference venue.

3. That the Society consider moves that would make conference sessions more valuable for both authors and attendees.

3A. That the Society do more to actively encourage the organization of whole sessions for the conference, particularly those that involve the participation of scholars not currently in the HES orbit. It is good for those scholars to develop relationships with and receive input on their work from members of the HES community, and for members of the HES community

to be exposed to this growing body of scholarship being developed by those outside of the traditional history of economics community. But this recommendation has more general relevance. ‘Curated’ sessions tend to be more coherent, better attended, and often lead to better feedback for authors. They also serve as a useful vehicle for generating increased conference attendance.

It would be useful for the Society to explore options for the curation of whole sessions that go beyond the “proposals for entire sessions are welcome” boilerplate that we find in the conference’s annual call for papers. Local organizers could, where feasible, attempt to reach out to scholars in that geographic area about creating sessions. An effort could be made to include on each year’s organizing committee an HES member with strong ties outside of the HES community to encourage the organization of sessions by members of the broader community of historians interested in the history of economics. And, of course, the organizing committee could be tasked with consciously brainstorming about interesting potential sessions—perhaps reaching out via the SHOE list for ideas—and with attempting to organize such sessions for the conference.

3B. That the Society seriously contemplate implementing some fairly rigid session-related guidelines. Our view is that the primary purpose of HES conference sessions is to provide authors with feedback that will assist them in improving their papers. Achievement of this goal is impeded when discussants are not well matched to papers, and when speakers and discussants run over their allotted time—the latter precluding what may be very valuable feedback from people attending the session.

Though the members of this committee are in agreement about the nature of the problem, we are of varying minds on the optimal response. Some members of the committee are supportive of ‘discussantless’ sessions, while others are strongly in favor of the traditional presenter–discussant model. Another option, of course, is the use of a single ‘general discussant’ for a session. Whatever the session format(s) being utilized, the committee is unanimous in urging the Society to formulate and implement a set of ‘guidelines’ (read: rules) to enhance the session experience. These guidelines should be communicated to attendees clearly and well in advance of the conference, and the need to enforce them should be impressed upon session chairs. The goal of these guidelines should be the development of a set of session norms and practices that lead to better overall feedback and thus a more useful (and satisfying) experience for the authors. More satisfied authors means authors more likely to return to future HES conferences.

3C. That serious consideration be given to the number of plenary sessions. Plenaries force more parallel sessions into any given time slot, thereby reducing attendance at individual sessions and increasing the likelihood that session attendees are confronted with multiple sessions of interest between which they have to choose. Though our committee is unanimous in the general recommendation here, we are not of one mind on the particulars. For example, the advent of plenaries for prize winners and Distinguished Fellows is relatively recent, and some of us would be happy to see those eliminated. Others consider the Distinguished Fellow lecture an attractive component of the conference for some attendees and would prefer to see that one retained.

HES conference Survey Results

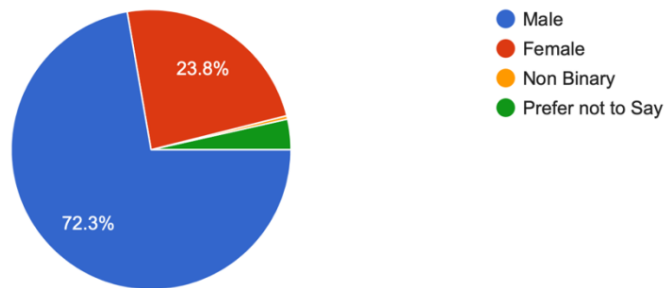
Visuals for selected questions

(Fall 2023)

1. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

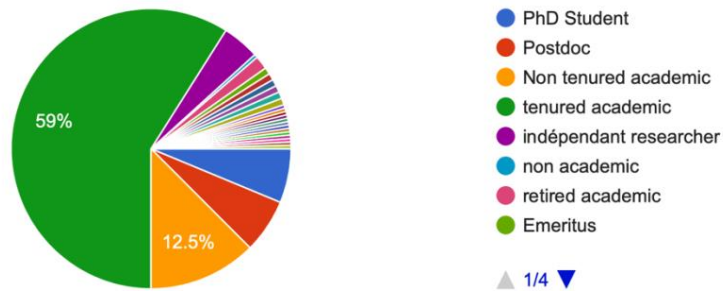
Gender

256 responses



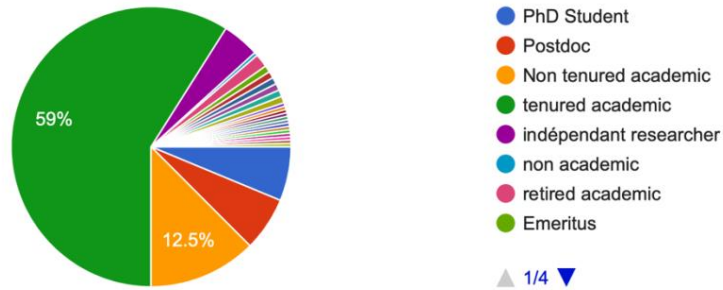
Status

256 responses



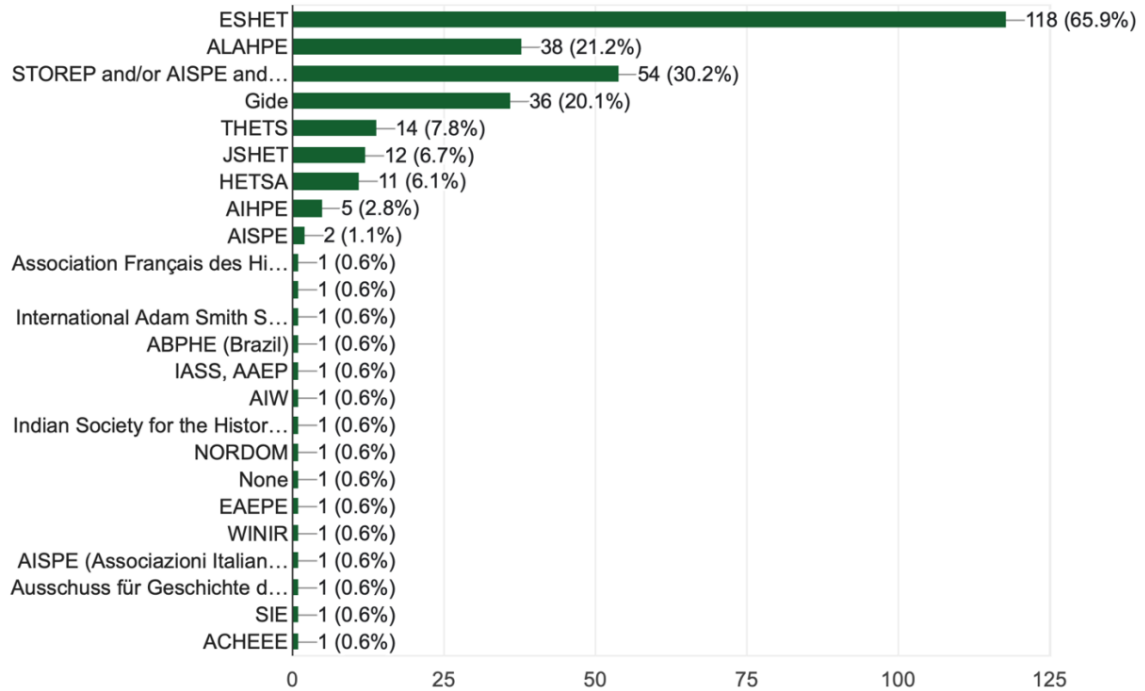
Status

256 responses



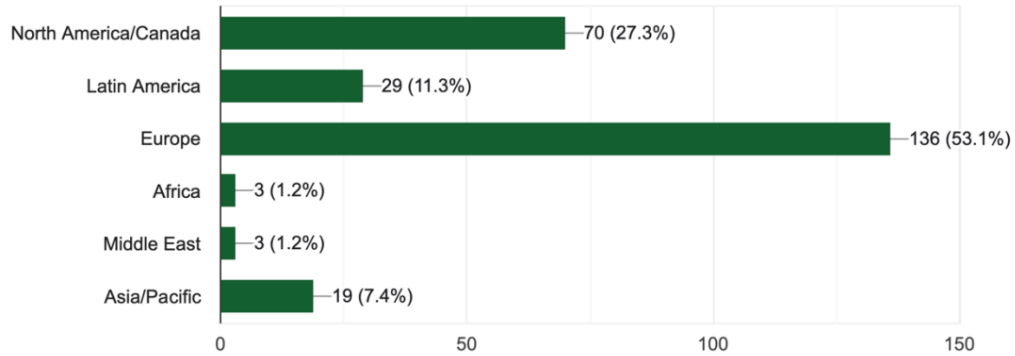
If you are currently a member of other history of economic societies, tick the relevant boxes

179 responses



Current location

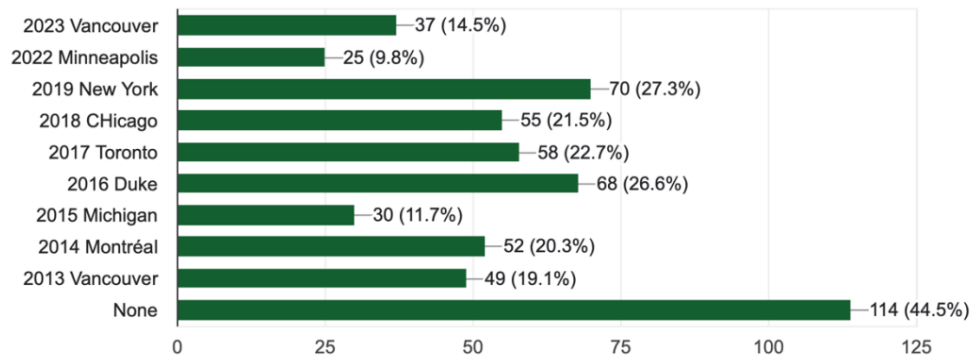
256 responses



2. CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE

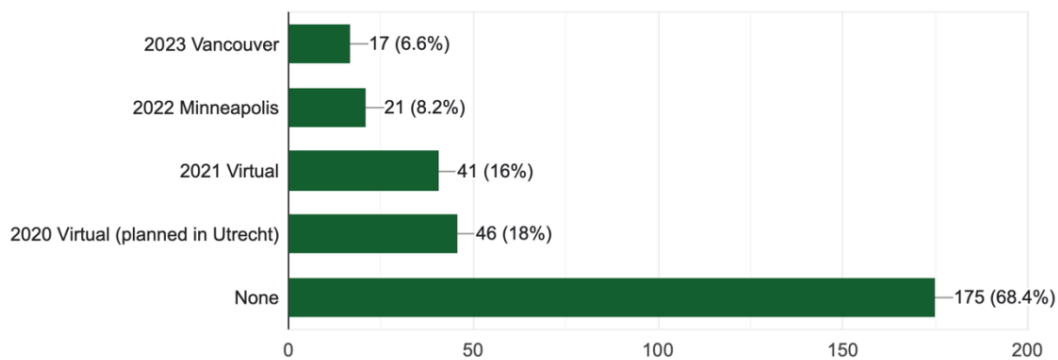
HES conferences attended IN PERSON in the past 10 Years (click on those you attended)

256 responses



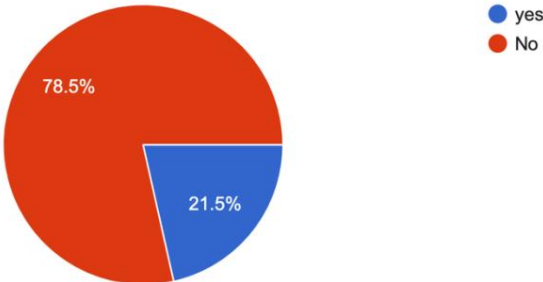
HES conference attended VIA ZOOM (at least one session)

256 responses



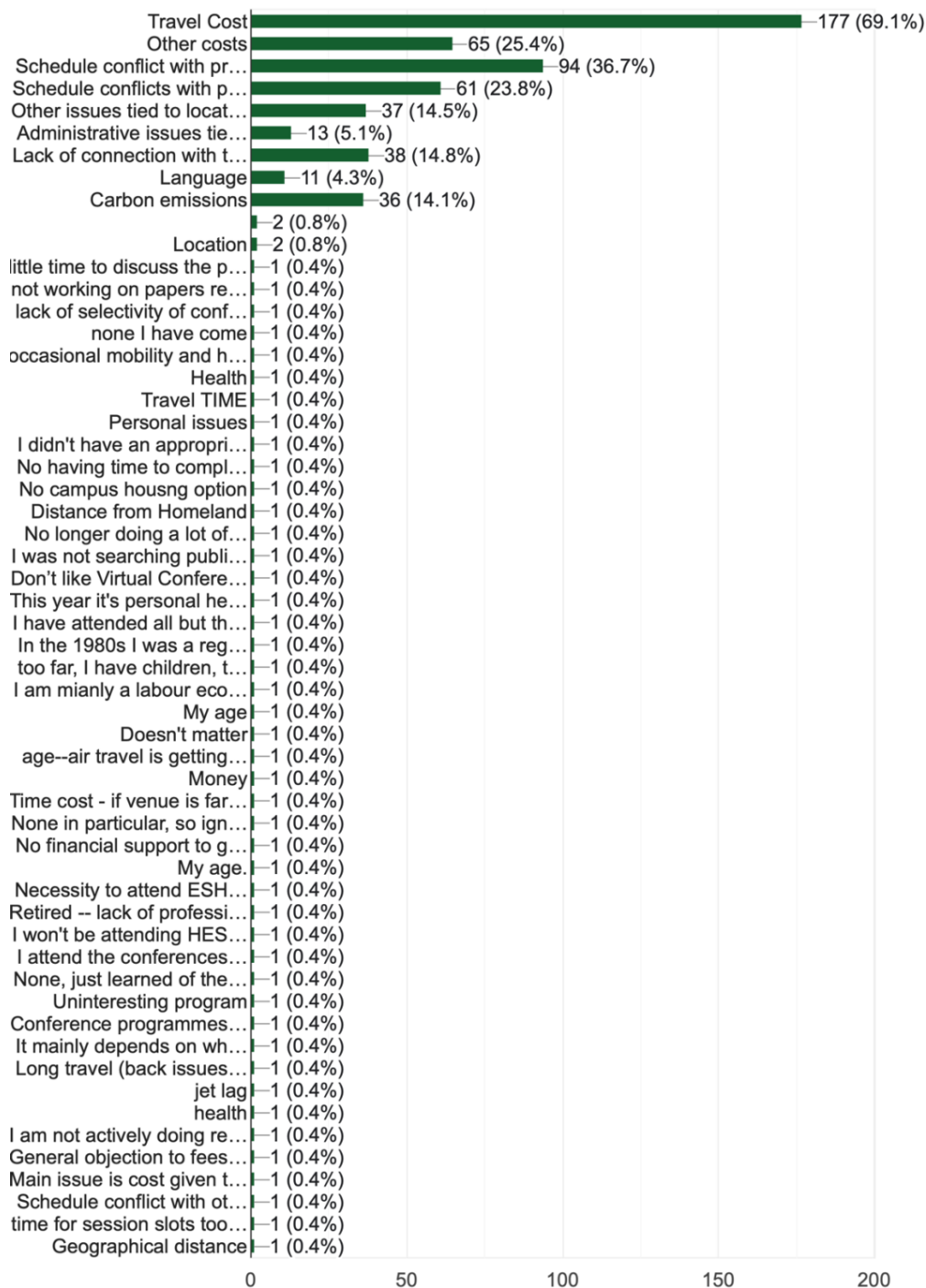
Have you benefited from the HES young scholar program to attend a conference in the past

256 responses

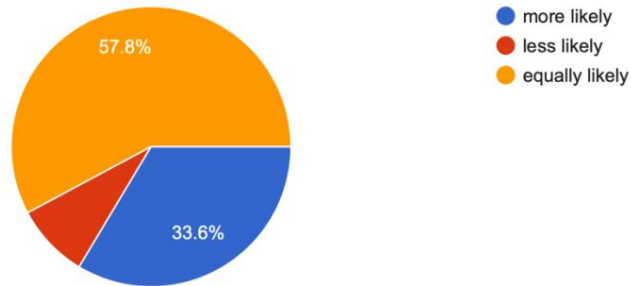


What are the 3 most important hurdles preventing you from attending HES conference

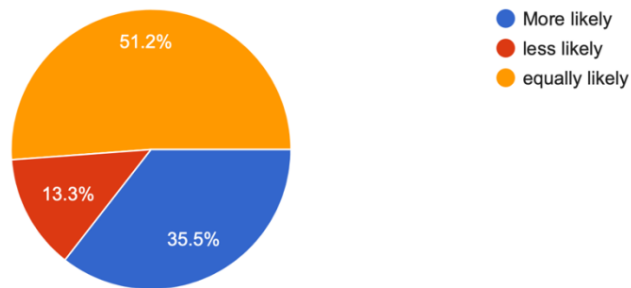
256 responses



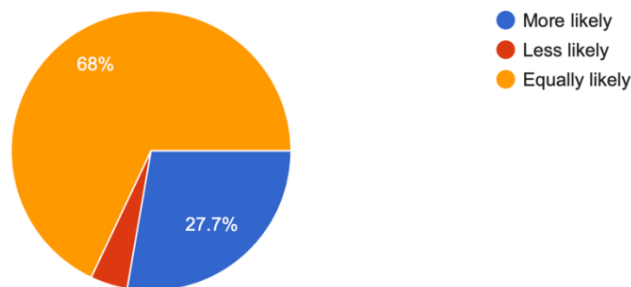
Would organizing the HES conference every 2 years make your attendance
256 responses



Would organizing the HES conference immediately before or after another history-related conference on the same continent make your attendance
256 responses

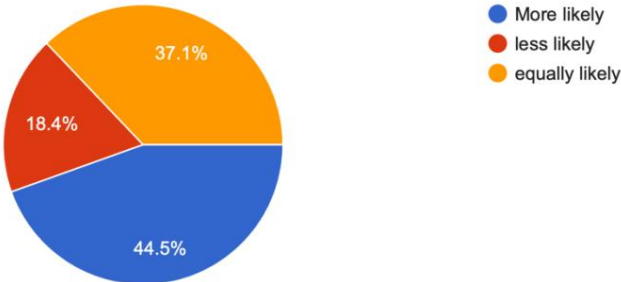


Would organizing other events related to the HES conference (young scholar workshop, training workshop) make your attendance
256 responses



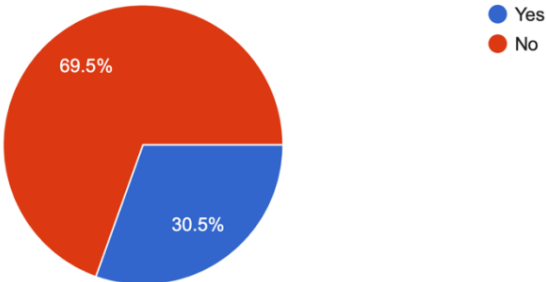
Would having a remote participation option make your participation into an HES conference

256 responses



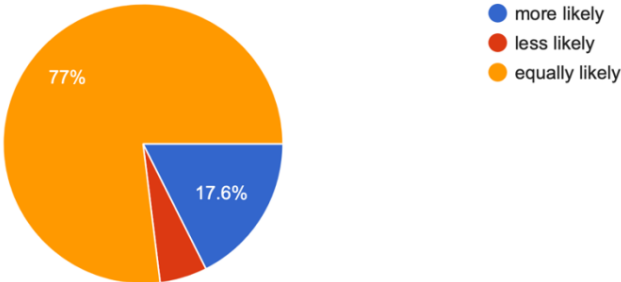
If you attend in person, would you be likely to move to online attendance if that option were available

256 responses



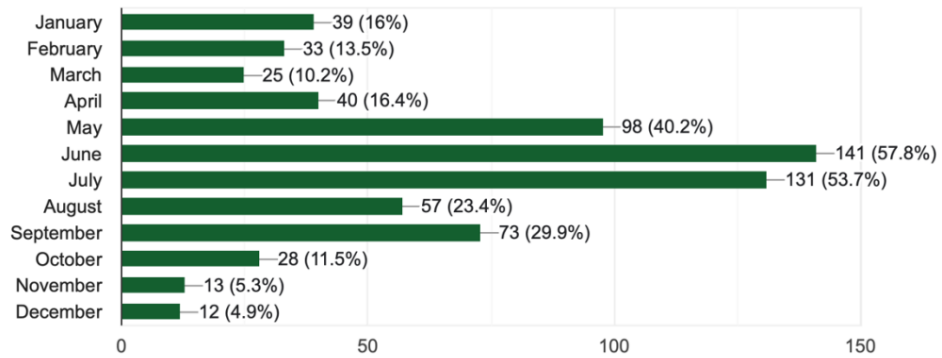
Would financial or administrative help to set up child care make your participation into an HES conference

256 responses



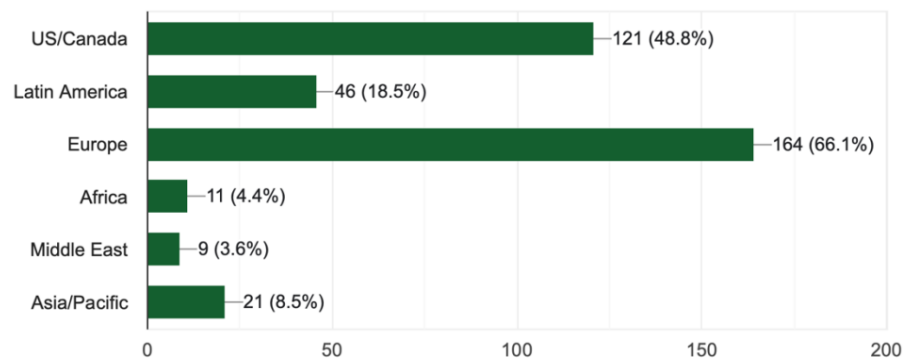
At which time of the year are you more likely to attend the HES conference (tick 3 months max)?

244 responses



In which geographical area (country, region, continent) are you more likely to attend the HES conference on an annual or very regular basis?

248 responses



The HES meeting has been held almost exclusively in big cities for the last decade. In the past, Prior to that, conferences were regularly held at t...rning to campus-based conferences in some years?"

232 responses

